

Analysis of the Image of Bai Suzhen from a Cross-Media Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Chinese mythology and legends have a long history, and they have become an important source for modern film and television creations. The Legend of the White Snake (Bai She zhuan) is a typical example. From its transmission through novels and folktales in the feudal society, to the 1990s television series New Legend of Madame Bai Snake (Xin Bai Niangzi Chuanqi) spreading throughout China, to the 2015 "Rise of Chinese Animation" and the popular "Chinese Style" in animation with the White Snake film series by Light Chaser Animation, the character Bai Suzhen has undergone various changes across different media. This paper selects three representations of Bai Suzhen from different media, applying cross-media narrative theory to analyze them. By exploring the relationship between image, media, and era, this paper reveals the role of cross-media theory in promoting cultural development and cultural identity.

KEYWORDS

The legend of the white snake; Cross-media; Bai Suzhen; New legend of madame Bai snake; Light chaser animation; Cultural identity

1 Cross-media theory and the construction of cultural identity

Cross-media narrative theory is a relatively new concept introduced by the famous American scholar Henry Jenkins, a pioneer of media convergence theory. In 1992, Jenkins pointed out the importance of fans as a creative group in updating and recreating original stories in his book *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. This book initiated Jenkins' early exploration of cross-media narratives. In 2003, Jenkins published an article in the *MIT Technology Review* titled *cross-media Storytelling*, where he first introduced the concept of "cross-media storytelling," though he did not elaborate deeply. In 2006, Jenkins published *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, where he defined cross-media storytelling as "a story that unfolds across multiple platforms, with each new text making a unique and valuable contribution to the story." The basic framework of cross-media narrative theory was thus established. In 2009, Jenkins proposed the principles of cross-media storytelling, which include extensibility and exploration, continuity and diversity, immersion and extraction, seriality and complete world-building, and subjectivity and execution. Later, he also proposed two major standards for cross-media storytelling: radical intertextuality and multimodality.

After Jenkins, American scholar Marie-Laure Ryan further elaborated on the concept of cross-media storytelling as "the construction of cross-media worlds." American scholar Carlos Scorri defined cross-media storytelling as "the use of different media languages and technologies to expand a specific narrative structure," distinguishing it from adaptation. She pointed out that cross-media storytelling is not merely the migration of a story from one medium to another, but involves different media platforms and technologies contributing together to build the story world.

Chinese mythology, with its many characters and rich narrative content, provides ample space for modernization and adaptation. In the late 20th century, with the rise of television dramas, many creators adapted traditional myths into high-quality works. From folk tales, novels, and legends to film and television, Chinese traditional mythology is no longer just ancient texts and heritage, but has transformed into dynamic cultural symbols. This dynamic transmission mechanism maintains the continuity of cultural genes while generating adaptive variations through intermedial interactions, ultimately forming a flexible structure of identity. The same elements appear in different media with different meanings and functions, reflecting the continuous interpretation of cultural subjects in the context of technological environments.

2 Bai Suzhen's image in the original texts of the feudal society

The legend of "The Legend of the White Snake" existed in multiple textual forms during feudal society, such as Feng Menglong's *Madame Bai Forever imprisoned under the Leifeng Pagoda*, Fang Chengpei's *Leifeng Pagoda Legend*, and Menghuaguanzhu's *Complete Biography of the White Snake*. Through continuous evolution, the original texts of "The Legend of the White Snake" eventually presented the version known today. These texts share two common characteristics regarding Bai Suzhen.

The first is the demonic, alien nature and destructiveness. As a thousand-year-old snake demon, Bai Suzhen is not bound by human societal rules; her values and problem-solving methods differ from humans. She possesses powerful magic. Feng Menglong, in *Madame Bai Forever imprisoned under the Leifeng Pagoda*, explicitly states from the beginning

that she is a thousand-year-old snake spirit, identifying her with a supernatural identity. Lady Bai uses magic to intimidate humans, employing illusions like a "hanging ghost" to frighten Xu Xian. To solve financial problems, she steals official silver. She employs "flooding the Jinshan Temple," mobilizing water creatures and raising huge waves to resist, sparing no cost, even at the expense of widespread suffering) to fight against Fahai, violating natural laws and order to achieve her goals.

The second is her humanized desires. Lady White actively pursues emotions and initiates marriage with Xu Xian. After marriage, she fulfills her wifely duties, manages the household, runs a medicine shop, practices medicine to help the world. When Xu Xian distances himself out of fear or even seeks help from Fahai, she still tries to maintain the marriage through gifts of clothing and persuasion. She bravely ventures to Kunlun to save her husband, engaging in life-and-death battles with divine guardians like the boy immortal, white crane, and deer boy. Her earnest instructions to her child before being subdued demonstrate deep maternal love. Bai Suzhen comes to repay the saving grace of the shepherd boy from a previous life; emotion consistently accompanies her life journey, possessing a "supreme emotion" quality of an emotional life.

The Lady Bai in the original legendary texts embodies the imitation of Confucian ethics, social integration, and the order and disciplinary suppression of heavenly rules and human ethics. She disrupts social property order, infringes upon individual psychological safety, defies natural laws, and impacts public safety and ecological balance. Her behavior patterns have distinct "transgressive" characteristics. This not only reflects her "alien" identity but also constitutes a key factor for her conflict with human social norms, moral principles, and rules. Her pursuit of "humanity" is essentially an attempt to integrate into Confucian ethical society; her desires and efforts for love, marriage, family, and offspring almost perfectly replicate the traditional society's idealized requirements for female virtues like chastity, obedience, virtue, gentleness ("zhen, shun, xian, shu") and maternal duties like kindness and nurturing ("ci, yu"). Her goal is not to subvert human relations but to secure a place within them. However, the iron law of the narrative, "humans and demons are fundamentally different," determines the limitations of the Bai Lady's snake demon identity. No matter how successful her "humanization" practice, the essence of "demon" remains an insurmountable gap. Her efforts to pursue happiness ultimately become a challenge to the established order, leading to suppression by the Leifeng Pagoda and Fahai, symbols of feudal order.

In feudal society, with the development of the commodity economy and the rise of the urban citizen class, popular literature like scripts and legends, different from poetry and songs, began to emerge and spread widely among the people. This type of popular literature became a tool for promoting mainstream Confucian cultural ideology. The Bai Lady's active choice to adhere to ethical norms of tranquility, chastity, and order after marriage, and her judgment and punishment by Fahai, who represents order, hint that people must follow feudal ethics. The ending where she regains freedom only because her son, the reincarnation of the Wenqu Star, achieves first place in the imperial examinations further deepens the pursuit of feudal morality. The narrative strategy that females must achieve self-redemption through the achievements of male descendants firmly embeds individual destiny within the patriarchal system. This is a victory for feudal ethics, not for the women she represents. The image of the Bai Lady in feudal society's original texts underwent a transformation from "demon" to "human" and then to "virtuous wife and loving mother." Her resistance was gradually replaced by active identification with ethical norms. This creative tendency reflects the expanding influence of Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucian philosophy of "preserving heavenly principles and eliminating human desires." When the urban citizen class attempted to gain discourse power within the framework of Confucianism, scripts and legends cleverly introduced Confucian morality into popular stories; Confucian thought permeated the daily lives of ordinary people through character images and stories in popular literature, achieving a shift from "rites do not extend to the common people" to "the popularization of ethical teachings."

3 The image of Bai Suzhen in the 1990s TV series: the new legend of madame Bai snake

In 1992, the TV series "The Legend of the White Snake" aired in Taiwan. The following year, it aired in mainland China and was widely praised, becoming a classic. The image of Bai Suzhen in this series already embodies modernity. For example, outwitting the Toad Spirit, Centipede Spirit, and Black and White Impermanence demonstrates her intelligence and bravery; finding ways to reunite with Xu Xian after multiple separations highlights deep affection and loyalty; finally, submitting to imprisonment under the pagoda to protect her son demonstrates maternal brilliance. Zhao Yazhi's portrayal was gentle, dignified, elegant, and graceful, with beautiful features and an ethereal demeanor, possessing both the agility of a fairy and the dignified steadiness of a lady from a noble family—a typical classical beauty. The role of Bai Suzhen required an actor with an appearance and demeanor highly representative of Eastern classical beauty. Zhao Yazhi's physical condition and personal demeanor highly matched the audience's imagination of a "thousand-year snake immortal" and "virtuous wife and loving mother," successfully shaping this television image.

Society continuously develops, and drama progresses. The Reform and Opening-Up policy starting in 1978 led Chinese

society through a transformation from a relatively singular and conservative planned economy to a diverse and open market economy. People's ideologies also underwent profound changes. The demand for culture became more diverse, and the value of the individual, emotional needs, and the diverse pursuit of a better life began to be valued and expressed. Social concepts constantly updated and iterated through conflict and integration. The story of "The Legend of the White Snake," overcoming myriad difficulties to achieve a happy ending, also resonated with people's expectations for a bright and beautiful future during the economic construction period.

Reform and Opening-Up greatly promoted cultural exchange and interaction across the Taiwan Strait and between China and foreign countries. Long-term political estrangement gradually dissolved, and culture became an important bridge for communication. Television dramas, due to their popularity, pervasiveness, and emotional appeal, became one of the most active and influential carriers of cultural exchange across the strait and even internationally. The broadcast of "The Legend of the White Snake" occurred at a sensitive and critical time when the Reform and Opening-Up policy was deepening, and cross-strait relations were gradually warming. During this period, the state began to gradually relax control over the cultural sector. As an important carrier of mass culture, TV drama production and broadcast policies were adjusted accordingly. This TV series creatively adapted and packaged the traditional "Legend of the White Snake." While respecting the core of the story in shaping Bai Suzhen's image, it injected emotional expressions more easily understood by modern people through plots like the pursuit of free love and resistance against feudal ethical shackles. This method of "putting new wine in old bottles" allowed "The Legend of the White Snake," a folk legend originating from the mainland, after being recreated by a Taiwanese team, to successfully "resell" to the mainland and gain widespread popularity. It triggered a phenomenal viewing craze and lasting cultural resonance, greatly promoting mutual cultural understanding and identity between audiences on both sides of the strait, enhancing national sentiment.

4 The image of Bai Suzhen in the white snake series by light chaser animation in the rise of Chinese animation

In 2015, *Monkey King: Hero Is Back* opened the door for the rise of domestic animation. Subsequently, numerous domestic animated films based on myths and legends emerged. Light Chaser Animation's "White Snake" film series was released in 2019, 2021, and 2024. Compared to previous images, Light Chaser Animation adapted the Bai Lady with a modern approach, and her image saw greater innovation and breakthrough.

In the first film, *White Snake* (2019), Light Chaser expanded on the Bai Lady's past life debt of gratitude. The Bai Lady becomes the young girl "Blanca". After failing a mission to assassinate the antagonist Prime Minister, she loses her memory and believes she is human. After recovering her memory upon unraveling her origins, she chooses to leave Xuan (the past life of Xu Xian in the film) to avoid harming him. Returning transformed into a giant serpent, she loses control but is ultimately awakened by Xuan and together they defeat the Prime Minister, her master, and other antagonists, preserving Xuan's soul for reincarnation. Later, the magical hairpin is kept by Verta. While continuing cultivation together, Blanca encounters a bottleneck. Verta returns the hairpin to Blanca, who learns she has remembered this relationship for 500 years and decides to find Xuan's reincarnation to spend one lifetime with him.

The second film, *Green Snake* (2021), is an original side story by Light Chaser, focusing on the sisterly bond between the Bai Lady and Verta. Blanca and Verta are defeated in a battle with Fahai. The magical hairpin shatters, with some fragments in Verta's hand and some in Blanca's. Blanca is imprisoned by Fahai under the Leifeng Pagoda. Verta arrives in a place called "Rakshasa Realm" (Xiuluo City), a post-apocalyptic setting with a technological feel. She must leave this place to find her sister. Ultimately, the white-haired youth accompanying Verta gives her the only chance to leave the Rakshasa Realm. Verta leaves, arrives at West Lake in modern Hangzhou after the Leifeng Pagoda's collapse, and learns the truth: Blanca had been searching for Verta after escaping the pagoda. After multiple reincarnations, she lost her memory, arrived in the Rakshasa Realm, and underwent a gender change. Relying on intuition during her interaction with Verta, she felt she must help Verta leave and regained her memories at the last moment.

The third film, *White Snake: Afloat* (2024), returns to the storyline of the legend, chronologically following *White Snake*, telling the love story of Blanca and Xu Xian. After persistently pursuing Xu Xian and using jewelry to repay a wine debt, Blanca marries Xu Xian, buries the hairpin under a tree, and vows to live as a human without using magic. After successfully eliminating rat demons harming people, Blanca and Verta's demonic aura is exposed, attracting Fahai. During the Dragon Boat Festival celebration banquet, Blanca drinks realgar wine, reveals her true form, and frightens Xu Xian into unconsciousness. She then goes to Kunlun to retrieve the immortal herb to save Xu Xian, using a play-acting method to eliminate his fear of snakes. Fahai attempts to forcibly separate Blanca and Xu Xian. Finally, unable to bear it any longer, Blanca retrieves the hairpin, resists Fahai, and decides to flood Jinshan Temple with Verta after giving birth.

Light Chaser Animation's Bai Lady has a weakened demonic nature, with significantly enhanced humanity and independence. Blanca appears in a white long dress, ethereal, elegant, gentle, and kind-hearted. Having just cultivated a

human form, she relies on the hairpin magical instrument for combat power, departing from the setting of a highly powerful snake demon. After marriage, she chooses to live as a human, initially causing many amusing situations. The film's Blanca is gentle and kind yet has an edge, taking initiative and action into her own hands. She adheres to her principles. After her life is disrupted, she transforms from "human" back into a demon. After repaying the debt of gratitude from her past life, she immediately chooses to find Verta rather than reunite with Xu Xian and her child, showing no dependence on men or traditional motherhood, which is significantly weakened. Light Chaser Animation employs defamiliarization techniques, such as renaming Bai Suzhen "Blanca" and introducing gender change; adding various humorous elements: the residents who have various problems requiring Xu Xian's medical attention during Blanca's pursuit of him, the seemingly powerful but actually just "punning" Kunlun guards; setting time and space across ancient, modern, and virtual parallel dimensions; greatly reducing the post-childbirth life, retaining only very few shots of the child as a baby, and creating original plot elements. These methods shape a Bai Lady who retains the advantages of previous images while discarding the dross of Confucianism.

Compared to the previous two images of the Bai Lady, Light Chaser's White Snake possesses more traits of modern women. In every lifetime, Blanca has clear goals: in the first film, to assassinate the Prime Minister who ordered snake hunting; in the second, to find Verta; in the third, to peacefully spend one lifetime with Xuan's reincarnation, concluding the emotional tribulation from her past life. The essence of stealing the immortal herb to save her husband and resisting Fahai is the refusal to have her "emotional tribulation" disrupted. Blanca is not an appendage to men; she always maintains her sense of self, discarding the "love-struck" elements found in some previous film and TV works where she would say things like "As long as my husband has fortune and longevity, I'd rather not become an immortal." However, Light Chaser's White Snake does not reject love between men and women. In White Snake, Blanca and Xuan wander between heaven and earth holding an umbrella amidst blooming mountain flowers, sing "No Concern" together on a boat on the river; after learning the truth, they separate due to misunderstanding but eventually resolve it and fight side by side. In *The Floating Life*, before encountering Fahai, the two practice medicine and help people together, their lives interesting and full of worldly charm. This ordinary yet romantic and free love reflects modern women's desire to achieve a relationship in reality filled with equality and respect, based on admiration for the other's character and shared life ideals, pursuing soul compatibility.

Green Snake, from Verta's perspective and survival process, showcases the sisterly affection between Blanca and Verta. Blanca is gentle, Verta is impatient; they are set up as "twin flowers." For Blanca, Verta is the only sister who never gave up on her and always provided hope and support; for Verta, Blanca is an elder sister with higher cultivation who always provided a sense of security. They regard each other as providers of protection, with friendship and sisterhood becoming their emotional bond, obsession, and motivation. In the process of seeking emotional belonging, both attempt to establish heterosexual relationships but successively experience imperfect outcomes. Ultimately, the two characters choose to redirect their desire for love and being loved back towards friendship, achieving satisfaction for this desire through subsequent plot developments. At the film's end, when Verta finally learns that the youth who sheltered her from the wind and rain outside the Black Wind Cave and sacrificed himself at the critical moment to send her out of the Rakshasa Realm was actually Blanca, all her love and dedication for her sister receive a response. The deep sisterly affection of mutual salvation between the Green and White Snakes becomes the emotional mainline of the story. This emotional support allows the two to finally reunite after multiple cycles of reincarnation. Xuan and Xu Xian are merely companions who walk alongside the Bai Lady for a segment of her life journey; the one always by her side is actually Verta. By expanding the sisterly bond, Light Chaser expresses the view that heterosexual love is not the only source of emotional support for women; familial love and friendship can also provide strength. As long as one is full of belief, positive, and strives hard, personal value can also be realized, creating a unique emotional experience for female audiences. This also echoes the modern female notion that "love is not a necessity."

Promoting cultural prosperity and building a strong cultural nation require inheriting and carrying forward China's excellent traditional culture. Light Chaser Animation, rooted in the long-standing legend of "The Legend of the White Snake," creatively transforms and innovatively develops the image of the Bai Lady, endowing it with new era connotations and modern forms of expression. It supplements, expands, and refines this cultural symbol, using animated films—a form beloved by the people—to enhance its influence and appeal, activating its vitality. With the proposal of cultural confidence, the slogan "rise of domestic animation" emerged. Light Chaser's White Snake extracts essence and draws energy from the treasure trove of Chinese culture, echoing the attitude of cultural confidence inherent in the Chinese nation. It moves people with emotion, telling the Chinese story of the "Legend of the White Snake" for the new era.

5 Conclusion

The image of Bai Suzhen has been continuously updated throughout history, spreading through various media in each era, with its transmission method evolving from paper-based to digital formats. From being a "demonic transgressor" in

the folk tales of feudal society to a “symbol of an independent woman” in contemporary Chinese animated films, the character of Bai Suzhen has traversed multiple media and narrative practices, revealing how cultural symbols achieve the modern transformation of traditional genes through intermedia practices.

In the changing media landscape, the image of Bai Suzhen has consistently served the function of promoting cultural identity: during the feudal period, folk tales helped embed Confucian ethics and moral norms within the merchant class; after the reform and opening-up, TV series became a key image in fostering cultural identity between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait; and in the digital age, animated films reconstructed a female subjectivity in line with Generation Z’s values. This cross-media practice is essentially an “adaptive variation” of cultural genes, preserving the cultural memory of the mythological prototype while giving it new interpretative space through the characteristics of different media.

Light Chaser Animation has created the White Snake animated film series through “deconstructive” retelling of classic Chinese myths and “constructive” creation of new myths, blending Chinese cultural core and aesthetic meaning. This cross-media narrative strategy integrates traditional Chinese culture with modern visual culture, displaying the cultural confidence and creativity of Chinese animation in the context of globalization. The fusion of classic myths with modern storytelling shows that, while retaining the core of traditional Chinese culture, innovation can breathe new life into traditional culture and the elements of old texts, making them relevant in today’s market and enhancing China’s global cultural influence.

Cross-media narrative has become a core mechanism for building contemporary cultural identity. It breaks the constraints of linear time through media convergence and reconstructs cultural memory through multimodal expression, forming a flexible structure of identity. In the context of building a culturally powerful nation, this dynamic transmission mechanism provides important insights for the modern transformation of traditional culture: only by respecting the characteristics of different media and innovatively expressing cultural genes can we truly activate the vitality of traditional culture and construct a cultural identity system rooted in history while looking to the future.

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